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ARLINGTON · TEXAS

Shuttered memories: Past glory can't save once-glamorous hotel

By Jeff Prince

ARLINGTON — A future president and an American icon slept there. Crystal chandeliers hung above patterned carpets and lush wallpaper. Women wearing floor-length gowns and silk evening gloves clasped hands with tuxedo-clad men and whirled across the ballroom floor while bands with horn sections played the music of the day.

But the music and the era have passed.

Flagship Inn, which was once the city's bastion of grandeur, will soon be a boarded-up memory.

Workers are hammering plywood over windows and doors at the hotel, which debuted in 1962 as Arlington's most luxurious resort, ballroom and community meeting place. The hotel is on 19 acres north of Interstate 30 and east of Texas 360.

"It had an ambience of elegance — the only thing like it that we had here in Arlington," said longtime Arlington resident Gwen Bodenhamer, who attended many functions at the hotel's Crystal Palace ballroom. "It was such a nice place, I never thought it would end."

Age, decay and competition from an influx of newer hotels in recent years pushed the Flagship toward a spiraling decline. But, for a quarter century, the hotel was a temporary home to tourists and traveling businessmen, and the ballroom provided a decorous background for wedding receptions, seminars and community fund-raisers, including the annual Cinderella Ball.

Star-Telegram/Darrell Byers

Ron Jahde, left, and Charles Baker pour concrete to set a steel post for a security gate at The Flagship Inn.

"I have many, many memories of that hotel," said Tarrant County Judge Tom Vandergriff, who celebrated his 1982 election to Congress with a party in the Crystal Palace. "Some famous people have stayed there. Ronald Reagan. John Wayne. Marina Oswald, shortly after the tragedy in Dallas."

Secret Service agents charged with protecting the family of Lee Harvey Oswald after he was accused in the 1964 shooting of President Kennedy moved Oswald's wife, Marina Oswald, and other family members into one of the spacious, isolated suites at the Flagship.

Reagan, then host of the television western series *Death Valley Days*, stayed at the hotel when he came to meet local western artist Joe Grandee. Wayne stayed there when he came to the area to promote a movie, Vandergriff said.

Past glories could not save the hotel. The facility has suffered from declining revenues since the late 1980s, when new hotels sprang up as competition in the Arlington entertainment district. After being appraised at $6.7 million in 1988, the Flagship's value soon plummeted to $1.4 million, according to the Tarrant Appraisal District.

Heaven on Earth Inns Inc. bought the Flagship, originally called the Inn at Six Flags, in 1993 from foreclosure for $1.5 million. Hotel developer Aims Properties leased the Flagship in 1996 with plans to renovate.

But the hotel became a larger version of some Division Street motels. Transient families paid low daily, weekly and monthly rates. Drugs abounded. Aging water pipes and infrastructure, along with a 1994 fire, rendered half the property uninhabitable.

Landscaping ceased and weeds sprouted in the cracked parking lot. Pools were drained, but rains would partially fill them, creating a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Residents complained this year that their water and electricity were sometimes interrupted because the proprietor was late paying utility bills. Several weeks ago, the proprietor told residents to vacate. This week, workers are barricading parking lot entrances.

A sign in the office window says "For Sale."

Real estate brokers and consultants wonder if the property will ever shine again as a hotel. Some say office spaces provide the most potential.

"I can't imagine any more hotels locating in north Arlington that can withstand the competition," said Jim Whitten, a broker with CB Commercial real estate company.

The property remains in the hands of Heaven on Earth Inns, owned by the founder of the transcendental meditation movement, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, once known as the guru to the Beatles. A company spokesman did not return calls.

A stroll through the Crystal Palace ballroom is akin to visiting the Titanic on the ocean floor. Broken pieces of crystal, the remnants of chandeliers, lie on soot-covered carpet. The ghostly ballroom is covered with furniture charred from a 1994 fire. A cardboard crown with "Happy New Year" printed in silver glitter lies crushed at the ballroom entrance, darkened by a lack of electricity.

Newer and more accessible hotels and meeting rooms might have stolen the Flagship's glory, but few can replace the facility, Bodenhamer said.

"There was never a place that had the warmth and intimacy of that place," she said. "It's the closing of an era."

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